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AUTHOR Sevelius, Jeanne M.; Stake, Jayne E.

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ABSTRACT

Attitude change in women's studies students has been a central goal of the women's studies movement since its inception. Attitude change theory stresses the crucial roles of prior attitudes and attitude importance in the effectiveness of a persuasive message. Attitude change dynamics were studied in 548 women's studies students drawn from 32 U.S. college campuses with established women's studies programs. The results provide partial support for the hypothesis that students with attitudes highly discrepant from the women's studies message will demonstrate less attitude change when they deem these attitudes as highly relevant. Contrary to the hypotheses, these students were not more likely to report negative effects of the course. The results were consistent with those of previous researchers who found that attitude change in women's studies courses were greatest for students who had the least feminist attitudes at the outset. Future directions for research should include investigating the effect of specifically preparing students to hear multiple perspectives that may differ from their own, as well as further investigation of the factors that may increase or decrease the likelihood of attitude change in students. (Contains 1 figure and 25 references.) (JDM)

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Running Head: ATTITUDE CHANGE IN WOMEN'S STUDIES STUDENTS

Attitude Change in Women's Studies Students: The Effects of Prior Attitudes and Attitude Importance

Jeanne M. Sevelius and Jayne E. Stake

University of Missouri – St. Louis

Jeanne M. Sevelius, Department of Psychology; Jayne E. Stake, Department of Psychology.

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Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Jayne E. Stake, Department of Psychology, University of Missouri – St. Louis, 8001 Natural Bridge Road, St. Louis, MO 63121.

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Abstract

Attitude change in women's studies students has been a central goal of the women's studies movement since its inception. Attitude change theory stresses the crucial roles of prior attitudes and attitude importance in the effectiveness of a persuasive message. This study examines attitude change dynamics in 548 women's studies students drawn from 32 U.S. college campuses. Results provided partial support for the hypothesis that students with attitudes highly discrepant from the women's studies message will demonstrate less attitude change when they deem these attitudes as highly relevant. Contrary to hypotheses, these students were not more likely to report negative effects of the course. Implications for women's studies educators are discussed.

Attitude Change in Women's Studies Students:
The Effects of Prior Attitudes and Attitude Importance

Inspired by the women's movement, feminist scholars have been developing women's studies courses on campuses since the late 1960s and 70s. Over the past three decades, these courses have been a rich source of interest and debate. One of the primary goals of women's studies is to promote attitude change in students. Women's studies courses seek to increase student awareness of institutionalized oppression of some groups (e.g. women, racial and ethnic minorities, homosexuals, etc.) for the advantage of others (Boxer, 1982). Several studies have provided evidence that attitude change of this type does take place in women's studies classes. Researchers have found that women's studies students often demonstrate increased sensitivity to discrimination (Finke, Maveety, Shaw, & Ward, 1992; Hertz & Reverby, 1992), increased tolerance for differing perspectives (Stake & Rose, 1994), and increased endorsement of egalitarian gender roles (Jones & Jacklin, 1988). Changes on these dimensions have been shown to be substantially greater for women's studies students than for non-women's studies students (for review, see Macalister, 1999; Bargad & Hyde, 1991; Stake & Hoffmann, in press).

An essential message of women's studies is that the dominant culture, as well as traditional values and systems of thought, should, and indeed, *must* be critiqued and amended (Boxer, 1982). The challenge to the dominant culture that the women's studies message represents is sometimes also a challenge to the attitudes and patterns of thought that students in women's studies classes have themselves adopted. Although more likely for heterosexual white men, women and minorities may also hold traditional values. Because women and minorities must function and cope in this society, the dominant belief systems are often not only integral aspects of their means of

relating to the world, but may be central to their identity (Schuster & Van Dyne, 1983). In essence, women's studies students are encouraged to examine and critique their own values and attitudes to the extent that they have been socialized in these beliefs by the dominant culture. Women's studies classes aim to make students more aware of how their own attitudes have been shaped by the dominant belief system and to encourage them to adopt more tolerant and egalitarian attitudes.

In the social psychology literature, an evaluative stance regarding any target (e.g. person, group, object) is referred to as an "attitude", and "attitude change" is a change in this evaluative stance. For example, going from an unfavorable to a favorable evaluation of a particular group constitutes attitude change. Any message put forth with the intent of effecting attitude change is deemed a "persuasive message" (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993). In these terms, we can consider the women's studies message a persuasive one because it strives to change students' attitudes regarding discrimination, tolerance, and gender roles.

According to social judgment theory, also called 'latitude theory' (Diamond & Cobb, 1996), susceptibility to attitude change depends on the closeness of the persuasive message to the individual's own attitude. Thus, the more discrepant people's attitudes are from the persuasive message, the more likely they are to resist attitude change (Sherif, Sherif, & Nebergall, 1965; Diamond & Cobb, 1996). The range of attitudes highly discrepant from the person's own and therefore deemed unacceptable is termed the 'latitude of rejection'. A message that falls into a person's latitude of rejection is likely to be viewed negatively and dismissed. In the women's studies classroom, students who initially hold less tolerant, less egalitarian attitudes may be considered to have attitudes more discrepant from the women's studies message. For these students it should be more likely that the information presented in the women's studies class would fall within the latitude of rejection. If so, then women's studies students who hold the least

tolerant, least egalitarian attitudes should show the least amount of attitude change in the direction of tolerance and egalitarianism. However, this effect must necessarily be quite limited because, to the extent that students' attitudes coincide with the women's studies message initially, less positive attitude change is possible.

When a persuasive message is relatively distant from one's own attitude, a person is more likely to have unfavorable thoughts regarding the message (Sherif & Hovland, 1961; Greenwald, 1968; Chaiken, Lieberman, & Eagly, 1989). To the extent that a persuasive message is counterattitudinal, a number of negative feelings, such as anger, irritation, or defensiveness, may be elicited. In the context of women's studies, students for whom the women's studies message is most discrepant (i.e. students holding less tolerant, less egalitarian views) should report more negative effects of their women's studies course than students for whom the message is more consistent with their beliefs.

Researchers have determined that attitude importance widens the latitude of rejection, thereby increasing resistance to change (Sherif & Hovland, 1961). Important attitudes are those that the individual holds as highly personally relevant or relevant in society more generally. Throughout the attitude change literature, attitude importance has been associated with more resistance to change (Boninger, Krosnick, Berent, & Fabrigar, 1995; Eagly & Chaiken, 1993; Petty & Krosnick, 1995). Given the reasoning and findings presented here, it follows that, for students with attitudes highly discrepant from the women's studies message, those who feel these attitudes are highly relevant to them should demonstrate stronger resistance to change than those who feel the message is less relevant. Among students with attitudes similar to the women's studies message, amount of attitude change is necessarily small and resistance low; therefore the association between relevance and attitude change should be weaker.

We tested these possibilities in the context of the women's studies classroom by examining the effect on attitude change and course impact of both the attitudes students bring with them and student views of the personal and social relevance of the content of their women's studies classes. Attitude dimensions considered were tolerance for differing perspectives and endorsement of egalitarian gender roles. Among students for whom the women's studies message was more discrepant (i.e., students with less tolerant, less egalitarian attitudes), it was expected that students who rated the course as highly relevant would report less change in attitudes and more negative effects than those for whom the message was viewed as less relevant.

Method

Participants

A total of 548 women's studies students from 32 college campuses with established women's studies programs were included. The majority of these students were women (90.5%). The students reported their ethnicity as follows: 80.2% white, 1.3% Native American, 6.5% African American, 3.9% Hispanic, 3.8 % Asian, and 4.2 % other. Ten percent of the students had first year standing, 18.4% were sophomores, 28.2% were juniors, 37.5% were seniors, and 5.9% were graduate students.

Procedure

A stratified random sampling method was used to select a national sample of 32 women's studies programs from the 1995 National Women's Studies Association membership list. These college campuses included 15 urban, 8 suburban, and 9 small town locations, 12 of which were private institutions and 10 were public. In 12 of these schools student enrollment was under 5,000, in 12 schools enrollment was between 5,000 and 15,000, and in 8 schools enrollment was over

15,000. Data was collected over a period of three semesters: fall of 1995, spring of 1996, and fall of 1996.

Students were recruited through women's studies teachers who were contacted by the researchers and invited to participate in the study. The teachers who agreed to participate were sent questionnaire packets to distribute to students in their women's studies classes. The questionnaire packet included a letter to the students explaining that the purpose of the study was to "understand your viewpoints – about yourself, your college experience, and important social issues." The letter also emphasized the confidentiality of their responses. The first questionnaire included questions about demographic information as well as questions measuring student opinions on egalitarian gender roles and tolerance for differing perspectives. This questionnaire also included other measures not relevant to the present study.

Students were asked to include their name and address if they were willing to participate in posttesting. At the close of the semester, a second questionnaire was sent directly to students who had given their name and address. This questionnaire again measured the attitudinal variables (egalitarian gender roles and tolerance for differing perspectives). This second questionnaire included the measures of class impact and perceived relevance, as well as other measures not relevant to the present study. A second copy of the questionnaire was mailed to nonresponders to encourage their participation. Of the students who participated in pretesting, 54% responded at posttesting.

Measures

Sex-role egalitarianism. A 10-item measure of sex role egalitarianism was adapted from the Attitudes Toward Women Scale (Spence & Helmreich, 1972). This scale measured the extent to which the student endorsed equality between women and men. Participants rated the extent to

which they agreed with the items on a 7-point scale, ranging from 1 (disagree strongly) to 7 (agree strongly). A sample positive item is, "Women should be given equal opportunity with men for apprenticeship in the various skilled trades." A sample negative item is, "In general, the husband should have greater authority than the wife in major decisions". Alpha coefficients of internal consistency at pretesting and posttesting were .74 and .71, respectively.

Tolerance for differing perspectives. An 8-item measure adapted from the Moral Values Scale, developed by the Inter-University Consortium for Social and Political Research, assessed tolerance for differing perspectives (Miller, Kinder, & Rosenstone, 1993). This scale measured the extent to which the student expressed an appreciation for and/or acceptance of beliefs and lifestyles that differ from the students' own. Participants rated the extent to which they agreed with the items on a 7-point scale, ranging from 1 (disagree strongly) to 7 (agree strongly). A sample positive item is, "I have much to learn from others who come from different backgrounds than my own." A sample negative item is, "It is hard to accept the different lifestyles and opinions I hear about today". Alpha coefficients were .80 at both pretesting and posttesting.

Course relevance. Because an important aspect of the conceptual definition of attitude importance is a person's subjective sense of the relevance of an attitude, Boninger, Krosnick, and Berent (1995) have suggested that attitude importance is best measured by means of self-report. At posttesting, two items assessed the perceived relevance of the course. Instructions for the social and political relevance item were: "Some courses are highly relevant to current social or political issues of our time, others are less so. Mark on the scale below the extent to which this class was relevant to *the social and political issues of our time*." The rating scale ranged from 1 (not at all) to 7 (a great deal). Participants were then given the following instructions for rating the personal relevance of their women's studies class: "Mark on the scale below the extent to which this class

was relevant to *your own personal issues and concerns*". The rating scale ranged from 1 (not at all) to 7 (a great deal).

Negative effects of class. At posttesting, participants were given the following instructions for rating the negative effects of the class on their lives: "To what extent has this class had a negative effect on your life? (Circle the number)." The rating scale ranged from 1 (much less than other classes) to 5 (much more than other classes).

Results

Preliminary analyses did not reveal gender differences in any of the study variables; therefore gender was not included as a variable in the analysis. The two types of relevance ratings (personal and social) were combined to form a single measure due to their high intercorrelation (r = +.61). The assessment of score distributions for normality indicated that relevance scores were negatively skewed; therefore, the scores were reversed and log transformations were performed to normalize the distributions before combining the scores. Scores for the egalitarian dimensions measured at pretesting, tolerance for differing perspectives and sex-role egalitarianism, were combined to form a composite score of egalitarianism. Lower scores represented attitudes that were more discrepant from the women's studies message.

The effects of attitudes at pre-testing and attitude relevance on attitude change and negative class effects were tested in a series of three hierarchical regressions. Dependent variables were: post-test scores for tolerance for differing perspectives, post-test scores for sex role egalitarianism, and negative effects of the class. The independent variables were entered in the following order: (a) attitudes at pre-testing (composite of tolerance for differing perspectives and sex role egalitarianism), (b) attitude relevance at pre-testing, and (c) the interaction of attitudes at pre-testing and attitude relevance.

In the analysis of tolerance for differing perspectives, after controlling for attitudes at pre-testing, attitude relevance did not predict a significant amount of variance. At Step 3, the interaction of prior attitudes by attitude importance was significant, F_{inc} (3, 723) = 7.52, $p < .01$, $\beta = +.27$. The regression analysis for sex role egalitarianism indicated no significant main or interaction effects except for the attitudes at pre-testing variable.

The interaction effects of attitudes at pre-testing and attitude relevance on post-test scores for tolerance for differing perspectives were examined according to the procedure described in Aiken and West (1991). The slopes of the regression of the post-test tolerance for differing perspectives (with attitudes at pre-testing controlled) on attitude importance were calculated at three levels of attitudes at pre-testing: 2 standard deviations above the mean, the mean, and 2 standard deviations below the mean. Figure 1 displays the interaction. Among the students for whom the women's studies message was highly discrepant from their own attitudes at pre-testing, those who also rated these attitudes as highly important at pre-testing demonstrated less increase in tolerance for differing perspectives. Using a t-test of the simple slopes of each regression line, it was determined that the slope of the high discrepancy group ($b = -.127$) differed significantly from zero ($t = 4.18$, $p < .05$). The slopes for the medium and low discrepancy groups were not significantly different from zero. In addition, the regression line for the high discrepancy group differed significantly from the slopes of each of the other two groups ($t = 1.97$ and 1.99, $p < .05$). The slopes of the other two groups did not differ significantly from each other. Thus, among those students for whom the women's studies message was highly discrepant, those who rated the women's studies course as highly relevant increased less in tolerance for differing perspectives than those students who did not rate these attitudes as highly relevant.

Note in Figure 1 that for students for whom the women's studies message was more consistent with their attitudes at pre-testing, less change was seen over time than for those students for whom it was more discrepant. Assessing this effect directly, we found that attitudes at pre-testing and tolerance difference scores were negatively correlated ($r = -.31$, $p < .01$), indicating that high tolerance at pre-testing was associated with less attitude change.

The regression model described above was also used to test the effects of initial attitudes and attitude importance on negative effects of the class on students' lives. At Step 1, attitudes at pre-testing (tolerance for differing perspectives and sex role egalitarianism) did not predict reports of negative effects of the course on students' lives. At Step 2, attitude importance was significant, $F_{inc}(2, 724) = 121.03$, $p < .0001$, $\beta = +.41$. Students who deemed these attitudes as highly important were more likely to report negative effects on their lives as a result of the women's studies course. After Step 3, the interaction of prior attitudes by attitude importance was not significant.

Discussion

The results of this study indicate that attitudes at pre-testing were negatively related to change. This finding is largely due to a ceiling effect for those students who entered the class with attitudes that were very similar to the women's studies message. When students began the class with attitudes that reflected the women's studies message closely, there was little room for them to change further in the direction of the message. Thus, when students express highly tolerant, egalitarian views from the onset of a course, less attitude change is possible. These results are consistent with those of previous researchers who found that attitude change in women's studies courses was greatest for students who had the least feminist attitudes at the outset (Thomsen, Basu, & Reinitz, 1995).

The relation found between course relevance and reported negative effects meant that the more relevant the course to the student, the more likely that student was to report negative effects of the course. This relationship held regardless of the students' initial attitudes upon entering the course. Students who gave high relevance ratings were indicating that they attached a great deal of personal and social significance to the issues discussed in their women's studies classroom. One possible interpretation of the relation between course relevance and negative effects is that students who deemed these issues as highly relevant became more aware of the negative impact of sexism and discrimination as a result of the class. Many people prefer to view the world as fair and just, and would like to believe that our society has made such significant progress that these problems no longer exist, or do not affect them personally. Confronting the reality of sexism and discrimination can require some difficult adjustments in students' lives and worldviews, particularly when these issues are important to the individual. Thus, women's studies teachers should consider providing students with options for dealing with personal reactions they may have to course content. Such options might include teachers offering to be available after class or during office hours to assist students with personal reactions or providing students with referrals for support or counseling services.

The present findings provide partial support for the hypothesis that students with highly discrepant attitudes from the women's studies message will demonstrate less attitude change when they deem these attitudes as highly relevant. On the dimension of tolerance for differing perspectives, among students for whom the women's studies message was highly discrepant from their own initial attitudes, those who rated the women's studies course as being highly personally and socially relevant reported less attitude change than those who rated these attitudes as less relevant.

These findings are consistent with social judgment theory, which predicts that strong and central attitudes have wide latitudes of rejection and minimal latitudes of noncommitment (Sherif, et al., 1965). Given these findings, how may women's studies educators reduce resistance in the classroom? Research in political persuasion has shown that forewarning people that they are about to hear a persuasive message increases the persuasive impact of the message by widening the latitude of noncommitment (McGuire, 1999). Thus, it may be helpful to prepare students in the beginning of the course for the presentation of attitudes that may differ from their own. Forewarning might be accomplished through a discussion held in the beginning of the course, or through an ongoing dialogue among teachers and students about differences in attitudes that are explored throughout the course.

A limitation of the present study was that class attendance and student understanding of course content was not assessed. For those students whose initial attitudes were highly discrepant from the women's studies message, it may have been difficult to attend to and openly consider the material presented in class, particularly if it was perceived as highly relevant. These students may have avoided attending the class, may not have participated fully, or may not have given their full attention to the message. In future research, assessment of how many classes the student attends during the semester would be useful to ensure that the student is exposed adequately to the women's studies message. In addition, understanding of course content should be measured to determine the extent to which students attended to and understood the information presented.

Past research has determined that women's studies students often demonstrate increased tolerance for differing perspectives (Stake & Rose, 1994), but the current findings suggest that this effect may depend on how personally and socially relevant the students believe the course content to be. Future directions for research in this area include investigation of the effect of specifically

preparing students to hear multiple perspectives that may differ from their own, as well as further investigation of the factors that may increase or decrease the likelihood of attitude change in students.

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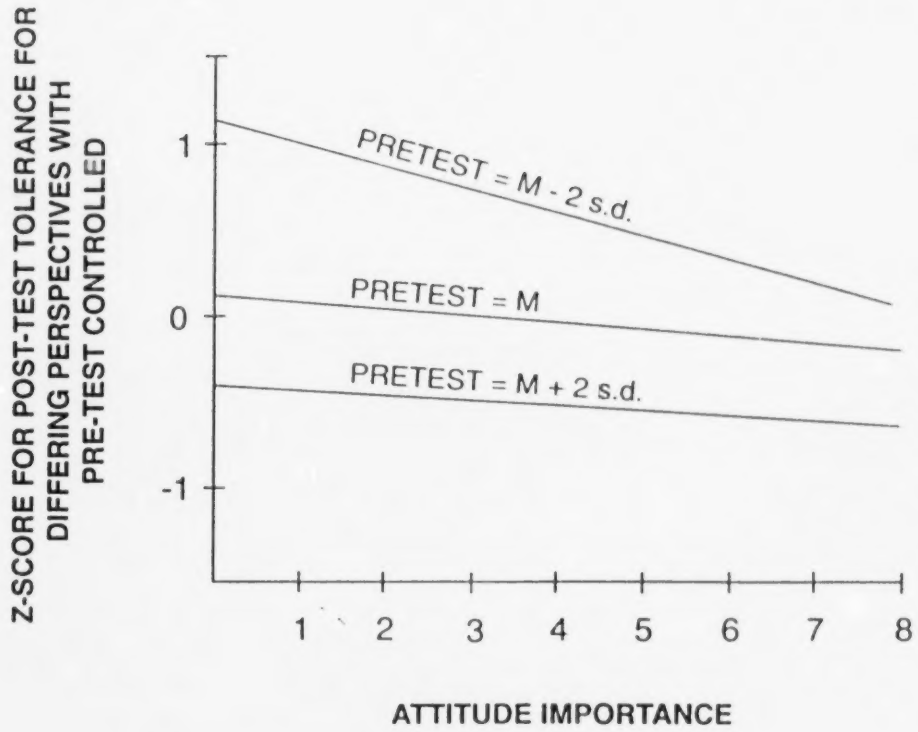
Figure Caption

Figure 1. The relation between attitude importance and tolerance for differing perspectives at post-testing (controlling for pre-test tolerance) among students with low, medium, and high levels of pre-test egalitarianism.


Z-SCORE FOR POST-TEST TOLERANCE FOR DIFFERING PERSPECTIVES WITH PRE-TEST CONTROLLED
1
0
-1
PRETEST = M - 2 s.d.
PRETEST = M
PRETEST = M + 2 s.d.
1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
ATTITUDE IMPORTANCE